

## Contents

|   |      |
|---|------|
| <i>List of Illustrations</i>  | ix   |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>  | xi   |
| <i>Preface: A Note on Language</i>  | xiii |
| Introduction  | 3    |
| 1. Imperial Rivalry and Maya Resistance in the Peninsula's Southeast                      | 22   |
| 2. To the South of the Uprising: British Munitions, Refuge, and New Landlords (1847–1850) | 43   |
| 3. The Pacíficos del Sur and Battling Land Claims (1851–1857)                             | 66   |
| 4. “We Find the Indians Very Useful” (1858–1863)  | 88   |
| 5. Maya Generals, Company Subcontractors, and the Battle of San Pedro (1864–1866)         | 115  |
| 6. Flight, Deserters, and Canul's Last Stand (1867–1872)                                  | 145  |
| Epilogue: Placing Boundary Markers  | 178  |
| <i>Chronology</i>   | 183  |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 187  |
| <i>Bibliography</i>   | 223  |
| <i>Index</i>  | 231  |

## Introduction

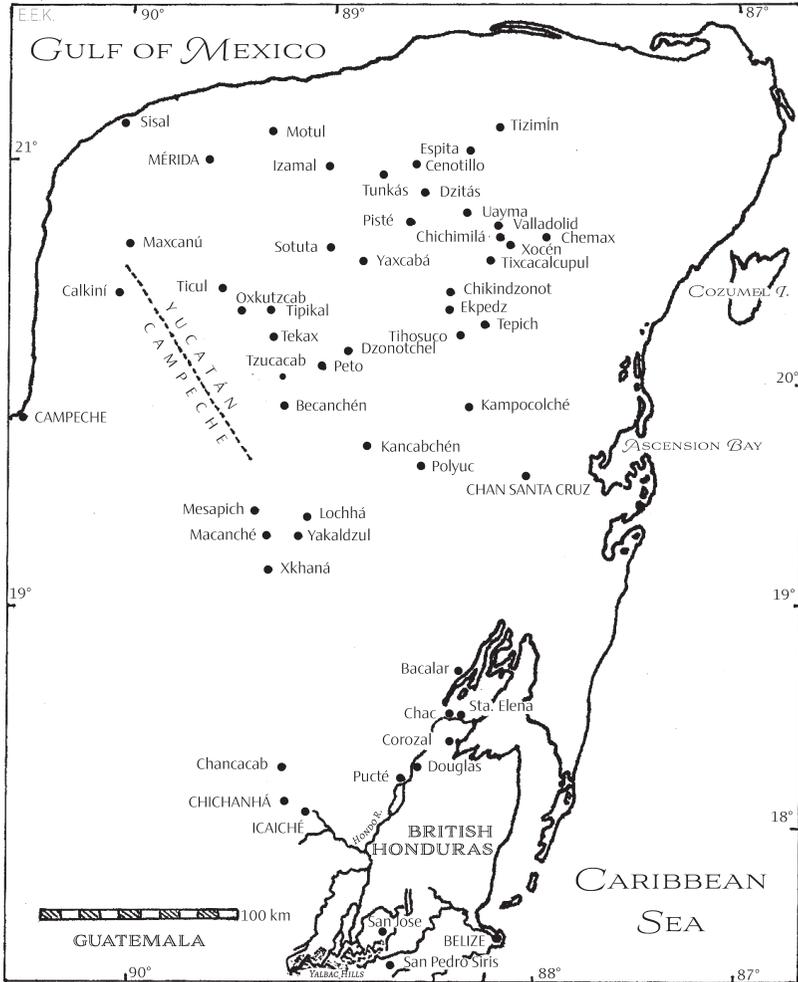
Several months into the Social War of Yucatán (more commonly known as the Caste War), Maya rebels seized control of the colonial Spanish-era fort at Bacalar in May 1848. To the south, across the Hondo River, lay the tiny British settlement in the Bay of Honduras, with its superintendent seated in the town of Belize. The rebel commander at the fort wrote to the British superintendent—this letter being the second out of hundreds of letters penned by Maya leaders to British officials as the war stretched out over the next five decades. What was his concern? Weaponry? Official recognition of the rebellion? A promise of neutrality? No—it was timber.<sup>1</sup>

Mahogany—a resplendent, rot-resistant hardwood that grows in the forests around the Bay of Honduras—was then coveted in British and United States markets for use in fine-furniture making and shipbuilding. If the rebels were to sustain an effective defense against the Yucatecan army, they needed guns and a regular supply of gunpowder and shot—and for that, they needed both money and friendly relations with British merchants. British woodcutters had been extracting logwood and mahogany along the regional waterways for more than a century. If the Maya rebels could somehow gain access to timber profits, they could defend and expand the locations they had secured.

In his letter to Superintendent Charles St. John Fancourt in Belize, Comandante (Commander) Juan Pablo Cocom explained that “we already have won the large part of the state,” that those were “our Indian lands,” and that mahogany taken from those lands should be purchased at the price of two pesos per log. That money

---

<https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646424634.c000b>



**Figure 0.1.** The Yucatán Peninsula, 1840s–1860s. Credit: Emily Kray

would subsidize their military costs and care for the widows and orphans of fallen rebel soldiers. One Bacalar resident who fled in the attack had absconded with logs, floating them out through the Chetumal Bay to sell to British merchants. The comandante needed the superintendent to ensure that the rebels would be properly recompensed for timber taken from “our Indian lands.”<sup>2</sup>

This letter demonstrates that from the outset of the rebellion, land was valued first as a place to escape the exploitative conditions under which Maya peasants had been living, and secondarily as a form of leverage to achieve other goals (in this

instance, timber profits). As we shall see, Maya leaders consequently aspired to be recognized as lords of the land and to maintain good relations with the British. At the same time, the British settlers had their own ideas about land tenure—seeking to secure British territorial sovereignty in a region in which they had never enjoyed it, and to establish private ownership of the land and of the enormously valuable mahogany trees thereupon. Control over land was also a means through which landlords (regardless of ethnic background) could direct Maya tenants to pay rent and provide labor (in commercial enterprises or in military campaigns). Consequently, while the Maya and British were compelled to seek favor with one another, conflicts deriving from the competition over land were inevitable. This book explores the ever-shifting political terrain as, during the first quarter-century of the Social War, one group of Maya (the *Pacíficos*) and the British at times cooperated with one another strategically, but ultimately fought in battle since an alliance could not withstand the accumulated insults, injuries, and resentments.

During the period that is our focus (1847–1872), relations between the Maya and the British had their own dynamic, but they were at every turn affected by the Social War of Yucatán (1847–1901). The fighting was concentrated mainly to the north of the Hondo River—that is, to the north of the region that the British called British Honduras (which later became the independent country of Belize). However, events at the geographical heart of the conflict were very much affected by developments south of the river, as well. The Social War has long been a subject of intense fascination and scrutiny, for a variety of reasons. It was a (primarily) Maya rebellion that lasted half a century, in which, in mid-1848, it appeared as if the rebels might successfully seize control over what was then the independent Republic of Yucatán. Since the uprising occurred on the heels of the wars of independence from Spain—within polities lacking established rules of governance and embroiled in a series of revolts and civil wars—the war fed upon the instability of the political landscape. The rebellion was transformational, as it pushed independent Yucatán to rejoin the Mexican federation (in 1848), and the war reduced the population of Yucatán by one-third through a combination of death and displacement.<sup>3</sup> The conflict fostered the creation of a new, syncretic, millenarian religion—worship of the Talking Cross—in which the Cross issued military commands to its followers, and in the Maya language. Finally, it led to new political formations, as some Indigenous groups were able to parlay their military strength into new political, economic, and civil rights.

At the outbreak of the hostilities, Yucatecan elites characterized the conflict as a Caste War (*guerra de castas*).<sup>4</sup> The name has persisted, even though most contemporary scholars acknowledge that it is problematic. This book's title employs the term for the purpose of recognizability. However, as some other scholars have

done, in the pages of this book I use the term Social War, because of three characteristics of the conflict neatly summarized by Wolfgang Gabbert. First, “Caste War” implies a division rooted in ethnic descent. However, a fact which is central to this account is that, over time, hundreds of thousands of people of Maya descent resisted joining the rebellion, sought peace with the Yucatecan government, and/or fought against the rebels. In addition, the rebels included—both as leaders and foot soldiers—many people who were of mixed ethnic background and even some who were legally *vecinos* (rights-bearing townspeople; in effect, non-Indians). Finally, by characterizing the conflict as a race war, Spanish-descended Yucatecans could blame “racial hatred” and draw attention away from the (legitimate) political and economic complaints of Yucatecan peasants.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, and to keep economic factors squarely in view, I use the broader term Social War.

#### OUR VANTAGE POINT

Another unfortunate consequence of the longstanding label “Caste War of Yucatán” has been a statist conceptualization of the conflict. From the outset, however, the conflict was regional in scope. Since most of the fighting took place within what are now the Mexican states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo, most of the existing scholarship focuses on that region. Special attention has been given to the rebels who called themselves *Kruso’ob* (People of the Cross) and their devotion to the Talking Cross. Don Dumond’s *The Machete and the Cross* is the magnum opus—the most comprehensive account of the Social War. He provides the widest regional view, tracing developments both within Mexico and the British-claimed zone, particularly the importance of competing land claims and British Honduran sales of guns, lead, and gunpowder to the rebels.<sup>6</sup>

This book focuses on relations between the *Pacíficos*—those who brokered peace with the Yucatecan government and thereafter became known as the *rebeldes pacíficos* (“pacified” or “peaceful” rebels)—and the British. Indirectly, it also illustrates how the Social War both shaped and was shaped by arrangements of land, labor, and migration within the region that is now Belize. Opportunities for illicit trade and resource extraction, and the ability to escape military violence, forced military service, debts, debt bondage, oppressive employers, and prison sentences by crossing from one region to the next (and sometimes, back again), built up resentments and disputes that spun out into international conflicts, leading to a reshuffling of alliances and a new round of boundary crossings and vexations. This work takes a view from the south, revealing that, rather than being a distant “hinterland,” the area south of the Hondo River was the staging ground for rivalries and strategies that had enormous regional consequences. We can see the transmutation of war:



**Figure 0.2.** Yucatán Province, 1780. Adapted from Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 77. Credit: Emily Kray.

once people crossed the Hondo River into the region claimed by the British, emerging arrangements of labor, law, land tenure, policing, and trade set new strictures upon people's movements, autonomy, and hopes for security. Reactions to those new strictures generated new conflicts, which ultimately fed back into military conflicts to the north.

The regional scope of the conflict is not surprising, considering that for centuries prior to that, large numbers of people had migrated from the northern part of the peninsula to the south, as well as in the opposite direction. Throughout the Spanish colonial period, Spaniards effectively controlled the northwestern part of the peninsula, but the portion south of Campeche and the Bay of Ascension was considered "unpopulated or unoccupied," with the exceptions of a small mission at Chichanhá and a military villa at Bacalar (see figure 0.2). Burdened, as northern Maya peasants were, with heavy demands for forced labor and church and civic taxes and fees, they would frequently escape by moving southward into the region that is now Belize.<sup>7</sup> In turn, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Africans and African-descended people who had been enslaved by British woodcutters were escaping in the opposite direction (as well as westward into what is now Guatemala).<sup>8</sup> As we

shall see, competition over land in the Social War was directly tied to the need for labor in military and commercial endeavors. Consequently, the ability of people to flee from one jurisdiction to another frustrated Maya leaders and British landlords, aggravating the political conflicts even further.

In the mid-nineteenth century, once the rebellion was underway, Indigenous people predictably moved back and forth across the Hondo River to maximize their safety and prosperity, in accordance with evolving conditions. One group of people who were a key link between Yucatán and the British settlement at this time—and who are critical to the developments described in this book—were those whom O. Nigel Bolland and Grant Jones identified as the San Pedro Maya. They were a group of Maya speakers who moved southward from Yucatán into the British-claimed zone in the late 1850s and early 1860s, settling several villages in the Yalbac Hills region, with a political center at San Pedro. The Maya rebels in Yucatán had by this time split between those committed to the rebellion (the *Kruso'ob*) and the *Pacíficos*. The San Pedro Maya subsequently broke away from the *Pacíficos* centered at Chichanhá, and therefore became a third group of Maya actors within a complex set of shifting political alliances at a time of intense insecurity and mutual apprehension.<sup>9</sup> This widespread insecurity was sustained and fed over time by a post-independence power vacuum in the early national period; successive waves of raids in Yucatán; a regional build-up of arms and ammunition; broken promises; brittle military alliances; disputed territorial boundaries; and a sparsely populated frontier zone that served as a safe haven for rebels, pioneers, commercial woodcutters, refugees, thieves, war profiteers, deserters, escaped prisoners, and runaway debt servants, alike.

How the San Pedro Maya were treated by the British at different moments in time had much to do with whether they were perceived as useful allies or treacherous foes. The San Pedro Maya entered a peaceful arrangement with the British in 1862, committing to protect the settlement in case of a Chichanhá *Pacífico* or *Kruso'ob* Maya attack from the north, only to be swept up later in a maelstrom of political scheming, accused of treason, and their villages burned by West India regimental soldiers in 1867. These events represented a watershed moment from the British perspective, ushering in a suspicious, defensive, hardened approach to racialized “Indians” by the colonial government. My initial questions were: Why did this unlikely alliance come about, why did it fall apart, and what was the aftermath of its collapse? Those initial questions led me down several rabbit holes of inquiry. Along the way, I came to see that in many respects, the San Pedro Maya were not unique, but had much in common with thousands of other Maya and mestizo settlers at the time, and factors that continued to trigger violence across time included contrasting and evolving visions of the land, strategies for the acquisition of people’s labor, and the risks and damnable frustrations that inhere in borders.

## VISIONS OF THE LAND

None of the various groups of regional inhabitants at this time demonstrated a singular view of the land. (There was no singular or fixed “Maya” view of the land, for example.) Rather, diverse conceptualizations of the land (as bridge, frontier, property, leverage, territory, and homeland) emerged over time in relationship to broader changes in material and political conditions. To explain: If one views a stretch of land as a bridge, one sees opportunity on the other side. If one views a region as a frontier, one sees low population density and limited governmental control, and consequently, opportunities for freedom from government interference, to exploit new resources, and safety from military conflicts. “Property” implies exclusive ownership, monetary value, ownership of the land’s resources, the right to sell or lease the land and/or its resources, and criminal trespassers. A related concept is “leverage”; those who control the land can withhold access to it to secure desired concessions from others (such as labor, payment, or military service). “Territory” implies domination by a political entity, often through military victory, with citizens whose rights are secured through birthright or legal entry, and borders to be surveyed, mapped, policed, and defended with force. Finally, if one views a region as a homeland, one imagines collective rights to belonging by virtue of original occupation, “native” inhabitants, political and cultural autonomy, freedom to use (and safeguard) natural resources, and those who do not belong configured as “invaders.”

Throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century, various images of lands—as frontiers, bridges, property, leverage, territories, borderlands, and homelands—were articulated in Maya-British relations and fueled armed conflict. Just as in the Spanish colonial period, some Yucatecans looked at the region of Belize and saw a frontier, where they might escape war and oppressive conditions, and find some measure of autonomy, or simply exploit new resources. Others (particularly peasants of diverse ethnic backgrounds) looked at the Hondo River and saw a bridge, and they moved back-and-forth across it over time, cultivating fields on one side but living on the other—to escape the combination of rent payments, debt servitude, and military impressment. Others saw property and the profits it promised. Others (particularly British officials) saw territories, secured through military victory, and they pursued regulatory policing of the borderlands and the population. Others saw homelands, to which they had a special claim as original inhabitants, and the attendant rights to use and safeguard their natural resources.

Curiously, at the center of the conflicts around the Hondo River, two powerful groups revealed remarkably similar views. Both Maya leaders and British timber company managers viewed land as leverage. Maya leaders of the time styled themselves as lords of the land and used land as leverage to secure not only financial

profits, but also the loyalty, labor, and military service of tenants. At the same time, British timber companies used London-based legal frameworks to lay claim to enormous tracts of land, which they could use to extract the valuable timber. In addition—acting as landlords—they used land as leverage to charge rent and compel the labor of their new tenants.

In the United States, two of the most intractable myths about Indigenous people are that they “do not understand the concept of property,” and relatedly, that they “do not view land as property.”<sup>10</sup> There is a kernel of truth in these myths, in that pre-colonial native North and Central Americans often used land in accordance with use-rights—that one could use the land by virtue of membership in a social group. The myth that Indigenous people “do not view land as property” is often repeated by well-meaning Americans who indirectly critique the logics of consumer capitalism by holding up Indigenous use-rights as an alternative cultural model. However, Maya people combined ideas of use-rights and ownership of land in the late pre-hispanic and early postconquest periods.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they adapted new strategies of land tenure within the contexts of Spanish and British imperialism. It is worth noting that if one’s romanticism leads one to appreciate Indigenous people for their supposed differences (e.g., egalitarianism and environmentalism), one denies them the opportunity to leverage resources for their own purposes.

During the Social War, Kruso’ob and Pacifico Maya leaders treated lands as (collective) property, charging rent from British woodcutters and small-scale farmers in order to finance their war efforts and achieve the sovereignty and political autonomy that were their end goals. Their demands, when backed with threats of and use of force, outraged British officials and woodcutters, ultimately triggering the British military campaign and demands of total surrender and relinquishment of land claims in 1867. At root, the British seemed reluctant to view Indigenous people as people who could legitimately hold and wield property rights. While they were willing to pay the Mexican government for timber harvest contracts, they found the Maya leaders’ demands “absurd” and “Blackmail.” They failed to envision the Maya as coequal parties in business transactions; this racist vision thereafter became enshrined in official policy.

### THE CYCLE OF DEBT, FLIGHT, AND CONFLICT

Another pattern revealed through the events of this period is that the conflicts over land created a positive feedback loop through the elements of debt and flight. The conflicts over land and the exploitation of labor both spurred people to flee in search of safety and freedom. Flight, in turn, exacerbated the conflicts, and the cycle of war continued. This was a complex dynamic that requires explication.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Maya families could secure most of what they needed on their own, so long as they had access to forest lands to farm and from which to gather resources. (They could sell a surplus of their produce to purchase other desired goods.) Therefore, someone who wanted to compel their labor—in either military or commercial ventures—could do so more readily if the people’s access to land were somehow restricted. As we will see in chapter 2, in the northern half of the peninsula in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a series of laws facilitated the large-scale alienation of Indigenous lands and the expansion of larger hacienda estates. Work on haciendas offered an alternative for dispossessed peasants, and in addition, they could thereby earn at least some of what was needed to pay their substantial church and civil taxes. Hacienda owners benefited from the accumulated debt of workers since they could parlay those debts into debt servitude and be assured of a regular workforce.<sup>12</sup>

As we have already seen, throughout the Spanish colonial period, Maya peasants sought to escape the burdens of forced labor, heavy taxation, and related debts by fleeing. While some fled to the southern reaches of the peninsula, others simply moved from one town to another in the same area. They would begin to accrue new debts, certainly, but they could at least start anew.<sup>13</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, as sugarcane cultivation, the pace of land alienation, and the accumulation of workers’ debts all increased, so, too, did the numbers of peons who escaped their debts through flight.<sup>14</sup>

Then, after 1847, the regional conflict ironically brought into being new opportunities for indebted servants. Runaway debtors might have guessed that they would be safest within the fold of the enemies of their “masters” (or landlords or other creditors). The master’s adversaries—they might have assumed—would make no efforts to repatriate the runaways and would prevent the employer from entering the territory to capture them. Matthew Restall identified this regional dynamic of labor exploitation in an earlier period, specifically in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the peninsula. According to Restall, although slavery was employed in the British settlement and in the neighboring Spanish colonies at that time, the regional conditions of labor and social life varied, prompting African-descended people to flee from the British settlement to the surrounding Spanish colonies, from which they thought they would not be forcibly returned. A region relying upon similar, yet distinctive, types of labor exploitation would ultimately share overlapping pools of labor, since frontiers would be “avenues of human movement.” “Borders between colonies were not obstacles but bridges, crossed by sailors and slaves in search of safety,” Restall described.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the British and Spanish alike employed exploitative labor systems, but the very fact that borders separated their respective realms of control meant that laborers would maintain

the hope that escape to the other side represented freedom. Thereafter, in the mid-nineteenth century, once the Social War was underway, indebted servants—as well as deserters—similarly likely would have envisioned that flight into a region controlled by their master’s adversaries represented a chance to shed their burdens and begin anew.

However, these patterns of flight ultimately fed back into and extended the cycle of conflict. As Maya peasants moved back and forth across the Hondo River, they riled landowners, Maya groups who claimed lands by right of conquest or prior possession, and Yucatecan and British officials, alike. Those seen as giving succor to runaway servants or deserters exacerbated the political and military conflicts, just as did the frequent raids by irritated masters aiming to recapture those who had absconded. Consequently, movement of people from one location to another intensified competition among power centers for control over territories. While analyses of the Social War have often centered upon the political struggles—for autonomy and sovereignty—the events of this book highlight the economic substratum of land, labor, and flight. At that time, there were multiple centers of (economic and political) power. While Restall considered the colonial centers of Mérida and Belize (and hinted at Guatemala City), in the mid-nineteenth century, two Maya power centers were formidable: Chan Santa Cruz and Chichanhá (later, Icaiché). Each center possessed its own fluctuating constellation of resources, rewards, and pressures on people. With five power centers, there were (at least) five times five “borders” that people could cross in search of security and prosperity.

Furthermore, the fact that a river was the putative border between Mexico and the British settlement made it possible for people to move quickly on the water and cross to the other side, whether to get away from oppressive conditions or to pursue new opportunities. In the mid-nineteenth century, almost everyone in the region of Belize was in motion: escaping, scouting, trading, positioning troops, smuggling, putting animals to pasture, cultivating multiple fields, recruiting, raiding, hauling timber, pursuing criminal offenders, collecting rent, conspiring, delivering messages, and surveying. The opportunistic movement of people across the Hondo River created intractable problems for governments, landowners, Maya leaders, and mahogany companies that often could not be resolved without calling upon the aid of more powerful agents at a distance. The borderlands began to take on a life of its own, luring people across it, stymieing others, and frustrating the imposition of law. Small-scale, localized disputes would spin out into larger conflicts. What began as a fight over a mule or late rent could blow up and trigger an international incident, especially as emerging governments sought to affirm and exercise sovereign power.

### NARRATIVE AND THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

In this work, I have aimed to capture Indigenous perspectives and experiences as much as possible. Rajeshwari Dutt's important book, *Empire on Edge*, analyzes how British Honduran officials, concerned with physical security, adjusted strategies in reaction to developments along the Hondo River throughout the Social War.<sup>16</sup> British views take center stage in her narrative. This is understandable since documents preserved in the official colonial records overwhelmingly were both written and archived by representatives of the colonial government. Here, however, I give priority of attention to documents authored by Maya people as well as what they were reported as saying and doing, and I try to understand what motivated their actions.

In addition to communicating information about a time and place, this book also represents an experiment in anthropological writing. This is not simply a creative endeavor, but also an attempt to align style and theory. Writing is theory, of course. The way we write about people reveals more about our theory of action than our explicit formulations ever could. How we write reveals what we truly think about such abstractions as agency, culture, ethnicity, conflict, influence, power, and structure. The form itself is content, observed Hayden White.<sup>17</sup> In this book, I use a narrative (storytelling) approach to best illustrate the social processes of becoming.

This storytelling approach emerges out of a sustained critique of conventions in anthropological writing and theory. In her now famous chapter, "Writing against Culture," Lila Abu-Lughod critiqued the concept of culture as highly problematic, as it erases differences within a group, erases difference over time, it distances and exoticizes ethnographic subjects, and in speaking authoritatively about others, it reinforces the global inequalities that permit ethnography in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Culture as a noun—as a set of shared beliefs and practices—is an abstraction. In the swirl of everyday life and interactions among people, a "culture" is not perceptible. One cannot reach out and touch a culture, and likely everyone would describe "the culture" differently. Moreover, the notion of a culture as an internally consistent set of beliefs and behaviors shared within an identifiable social group is, at least in part, an artifact of a century of a certain type of ethnographic writing. In the conventional approach, the ethnographer would conduct fieldwork that amounted to hundreds or thousands of interactions with various people, playing out over a year or so in time (diachronic). The process was often confusing, characterized by frequent misunderstandings, social blunders, and uncertainty about people's intentions. Thereafter, having returned home, the anthropologist would pore over the piles of fieldnotes and interview transcriptions, straining to see patterns. The polished ethnographic text that emerged a year or more later would typically describe a neatly organized system of belief and behavior that bore little resemblance to the ethnographer's diverse

and confusing interactions and conversations “in the field.” While the fieldwork was diachronic, the cultural “system” described was synchronic. Earlier ethnographic texts both assumed and reinforced an understanding of a culture as logically consistent, stable over time, and shared within a bounded social group.<sup>19</sup>

That approach has been thoroughly critiqued, and it is now generally acknowledged within cultural anthropology that the sociocultural world is always in the process of becoming. If ethnographers must strain to interpret the meanings that motivate people’s actions and expressions, it is because all interlocutors are constantly trying to discern one another’s meanings and motives while also trying to communicate their own. Culture, therefore, is negotiated in and emergent through every social interaction.

Moreover, in their interactions in the present, people communicate and take steps toward creating their idealized future. They aim to refashion the world to create the conditions that would promote and sustain the well-being, safety, and contentment of themselves and others about whom they care. If culture does exist, it is oriented to the future rather than to the past. Critiquing the notion that people follow a “way of life,” which would entail “a prescribed code of conduct, sanctioned by traditions, that individuals are bound to observe,” Tim Ingold described the person as a “wayfarer.” What a wayfarer does, he wrote, “is not to act out a script received from predecessors but literally to negotiate a path through the world.” We might say that action, therefore, entails both creativity and courage. If we accept this theory of action, the style of writing must align with it. Taking a series of diachronic events and reducing it to a synchronic system (a “culture”) would contravene the nature of becoming. It would strip people of the creativity and courage of their wayfaring. If the social world is always in the process of becoming, emerging out of people’s wayfaring and future-building activities, a storytelling (narrative) framework is most suited for its description. As Ingold wrote: “For the things of this world are their stories, identified not by fixed attributes but by their paths of movement in an unfolding field of relations.”<sup>20</sup>

Attention to writing style is particularly important for this region of the world, since there has persisted a tendency to write about Maya people in ways that imply homogeneity of and continuity in thought and practice over time. This may reflect romanticism about the Maya—continuity of belief and behavior over time is often celebrated as a triumph. More than anything, though, the extraordinary tumult of the late nineteenth century—including the sustained armed conflicts, the frequent assassinations of leaders, the violent raids conducted in search of deserters and escaped debt servants—should be a signal that looking for continuity would be asking the wrong question. If anthropology cranes its neck to see what remains the same despite extraordinary pressures, it would be a bankrupt discipline—one that cranks out the same “answer” and thwarts discovery.

Rather than asking what of the past the Maya retained, we should be asking what kind(s) of future they (as individuals) were trying to create. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Maya people created and experimented with leadership, regional political alliances, regional identities, worship, notions of collective territory, and the commercialization of property and natural resources. Much of this book concerns land claims: how people asserted the right to access, use, control, and own stretches of land and how they did so on the bases of personal position and membership in a group. This was a tricky endeavor since—amid war, dispossession, debt servitude, and flight—people were on the move and often (quite literally) on the run. Successfully asserting belonging in a new location would have depended upon their ability to convince others—even complete strangers—that they had common cause. If the nineteenth century was an epoch of war and competing visions of belonging, it was also an epoch of creation, as people tried to create a space for themselves, even if those claims entailed enormous risks and thousands lost their lives in the process.

Abu-Lughod called for experimentation with “narrative ethnographies of the particular,” which would narrate how individual people have—with agency, contestation, and deliberation—carried out their lives. These narratives would resist generalization about culture and preserve agency.<sup>21</sup> John Van Maanen similarly called for storytelling approaches in ethnography—what he called “impressionist tales.” Interactions and events would be narrated in chronological order so that knowledge is revealed to the reader over time, and people are preserved as individuals with names, personalities, reactions, and words spoken. Such storytelling techniques, he believed, would highlight the “episodic, complex, and ambivalent realities” of social life.<sup>22</sup> When undertaken with respect to historical inquiry, such narratives might end up curiously looking a lot like the styles of writing associated with the discipline of history. They would track the actions of individuals, the resources and obstacles that structure their options, the difficult decisions laid out before them, and the costs and consequences of actions. Such narratives would have dramatic events, turning points, watershed moments, risks and rewards, and moments of crisis and resolution. Rather than learning about “Maya beliefs” about land, war, and leadership, the focus would be on individual actors, the choices they made, and how their actions affected others in turn. The subject would not be “Maya culture” or even “the Maya,” but how this series of events unfolded over time through the decisions and interactions of individuals. Would this blur the boundary between anthropology and history? Perhaps, but if so, so be it.

Such an approach might be particularly important when writing about war. Carolyn Nordstrom’s *A Different Kind of War Story* shows how a war is not constituted by two “sides” motivated by opposing ideologies. Rather, it involves a multiplicity of types of actors (such as civilians, voluntary recruits, impressed soldiers,

civilian collaborators, spies, smugglers, war profiteers, healers, and visionaries), all of whom have different and shifting experiences and motivations under the umbrella term of “war.” Anthropologists should be attuned to the myriad experiences of people on the ground, for ultimately, it is the sum of their actions that perpetuates the violence or brings it to a close.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than being abstract “Maya,” “peasants,” or “workers” steered by structures and inherited patterns of thought, nineteenth-century Maya people were multidimensional and often unpredictable.<sup>24</sup> Through their words and actions, they sought to persuade different audiences of courses of action, and they were also capable of changing their minds. For example, the picture of San Pedro Maya leader Asunción Ek that emerges from the historical documents is that he was sometimes humble, gentle, and conciliatory, sometimes frightened, sometimes angry and threatening, and sometimes cagey and inscrutable. In these pages, I will introduce you to many individuals in addition to Ek, including Luciano Tzuc, Florencio Vega, Marcos Canul, Robert Downer, Calisto Medina, John Carmichael, Basilio Grajales, John Hodge, J. Gardiner Austin, among others.<sup>25</sup> I would like you to know them as individuals, because that is how they knew one another. They interacted with one another over time and in different contexts, and consequently would not have known one another as stock characters or (solely) as representatives of one ethnic group or another. They knew one another as multifaceted—perhaps as both employer and courtroom magistrate, or as fellow soldier and political rival, or as military deserter and timber crew foreman, or as landlord and spy—and with distinctive personalities. While the historical documents are often silent about sensory details that would help us visualize certain pivotal interactions (such as settings, what a person looked like, the languages in which they communicated, the clothes they wore, whether they rode a horse or walked on foot, etc.), I will provide such details here and there and quote passages so that you can “hear” people’s voices. Ultimately, I aim to animate the individuals whose excruciating decisions—within specific political and economic constraints—had fateful outcomes. I aim to track their wayfaring, as they charted their own paths and turned blind corners, across terrain strewn with pain, violence, abuse, selfishness, deception, traps, lethal indifference, suspicion, and glimpses of freedom. You may not like them all, but I hope that you will be able to envision them and the worlds they were trying to fashion.

#### HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

My research methodology could be called historical ethnography, as I approach the historical record from the perspective of an anthropologist, and I rely on both historical documents and interviews. I began with sustained attention to one place

and time: western Belize in the period 1847–1872, between the initial uprising and the so-called “last Indian attack” on the British settlement. With my initial goal of understanding why the San Pedro Maya–British alliance was forged and why it fell apart, I sought to reconstruct as much as possible the minute details of the region of western Belize at the time and to reconstruct pivotal interactions. Then, in dialectical fashion, I moved ever-outwardly in concentric sweeps, looking across a broader expanse and further back in time to trace the larger processes, material conditions, and patterns of interaction that constituted the context within which people operated and the forces that might have steered their decisions. Tracing these changes over time requires a balance between a narrative framework and description of the details of community life.

The primary written materials consulted for this book consist of four types. Roughly half of the archival records consulted for this book were transcriptions of such documents most generously shared by Grant Jones from his research in the Belize Archives and Records Service in Belmopan, Belize, in the 1970s. I am profoundly grateful for his generosity. Using his notes in fact turned out to be essential, since some of the documents he transcribed can no longer be found in the archive.<sup>26</sup> Second, I consulted additional documents from that archive and the Colonial Office records in the National Archives (United Kingdom). Third, I utilized summaries and reprints of documents indexed in Governor-General John Alder Burdon’s massive, three-volume *Archives of British Honduras*.<sup>27</sup> Finally, primary published materials such as treaties, colonial reports and handbooks, maps, almanacs, and narratives by travelers, amateur archaeologists, and military and colonial officers provided additional context for understanding.

Working with the colonial British documents requires a steadfastly critical perspective. One faces the typical problems of working with older documents in a tropical setting: fading of ink, crumbling pages, and damage from moisture and mildew. Some documents that were available a few short decades ago have since gone missing. Other obstacles are typical of records produced within the context of colonialism. For one, as the overwhelming majority are British-authored, events are filtered through those cultural and political perspectives. Given the frequent competition and conflict over land and resources, it is not surprising that British officials often offered dim views of Chichanhá and Icaiché moral characters and ambitions. One might read those assessments more critically, seeing them as often self-serving commentary within the highly charged atmosphere of war, border disputes, competition over valuable resources, and cross-cultural misunderstandings. Other problems of understanding stem from miscommunication across languages and cultures: the colonial interlocutors probably regularly misunderstood (and then, misrepresented) one another, and some documents were preserved only in translation.

In addition, the documents preserved in the archives do not provide a comprehensive view of life in the British settlement. What was communicated between government officials reflected government concerns, preoccupations, and worries, not the multitudinous other aspects of life in the region. When things were going to plan, they went unspoken. For example, we know from offhand mentions now and again that debt servitude was a central aspect of employer-employee relations in the British settlement. However, it did not become a matter for investigation and elaboration by the lieutenant governor until it was seen as problematic—when, in the late 1860s, British Honduran employers characterized the wage advance system (which led to indebted servitude) as a system exploited by the workers and British officials perceived it as threatening the colony's safety. Moreover, decisions about what to preserve would have been influenced by government interests and initiatives. Certain documents that would normally be expected to be archived are missing, indicating that some British officials may have engaged in deception regarding sensitive political matters.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the documents consulted for this book were warped by violence, abuse, and fear. (Since I needed to trace conflicts and alliances, I directed attention to documents with those foci.) Wherever violence, crime, and abuse are found, however, misinformation of various kinds follows. The documents are replete with strategic lies, idle threats, and rumors that proved false. People would lie to smear foes or to shield themselves from retaliation by political enemies, colonial officers, employers, landlords, and/or creditors. Idle threats provoked fear in order to ensure compliance. Rumors floated on the wind, electrified by a steady current of anxiety. As a lieutenant governor once remarked: "Allowances must necessarily be made for the difficulty of obtaining evidence at a village where nearly every one is directly or indirectly implicated, and in a district where each person is more or less controlled by fear."<sup>29</sup> Consequently, innumerable statements in these documents cannot be taken at face value, but instead, have to be read carefully and critically, looking for contradictions, evaluating the likelihood of certain events, and considering the motives of the authors and their sources.

Finally, I supplemented the historical documents with interviews of elders who had lived in the San Pedro region. After San Pedro was abandoned in the first part of the twentieth century, San Jose (Yalbac) became the largest Maya settlement in western British Honduras. After the wholesale eviction of San Jose residents in 1936 by the Belize Estate and Produce Company (a later manifestation of the British Honduras Company, which figures largely in this book), one group resettled in San Jose Palmar (south of Orange Walk) and another in Santa Familia (east of San Ignacio).<sup>30</sup> In these interviews, fourteen people who lived in San Jose prior to the 1936 eviction spoke about what they remembered of the village in the

1930s and what their relatives had told them about earlier decades. These interviews shed light on patterns of land tenure, production, consumption, labor, historical memory of Pacífico-Kruso'ob conflicts and debt servitude, and the powerful position of the company within the colony. The original goal of those interviews had been to supplement the information derived from archaeological and archival investigations—to fill in the gaps, under the assumption that some of what was true in the 1930s might also have been true in earlier periods. However, the elders from San Jose revealed a great deal of information about the relationship between the company, the colonial government, and the Maya residents in the 1930s, which should be developed at length in a separate work.

### OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 offers historical background for understanding the competing land claims that would be central to the Pacífico-British conflict beginning in the 1850s. The chapter describes the flight of northern Maya to the Belize region during the colonial period, where they developed strategies of resistance to European rule. It also delineates the Anglo-Spanish territorial competition and the British commercial pursuit of logwood and mahogany that led woodcutters farther into the Belizean interior, leading to clashes with Indigenous inhabitants. Chapter 2 reviews the conditions north of the Hondo River (land alienation, taxation, and debt servitude) that triggered the Social War peasant uprising in 1847. It charts developments south of the river once the uprising was underway: the reliance of the rebels on British munitions, the importance to rebel leaders of land (and what they could leverage thereby), the flight southward of thousands of Yucatecan refugees, and the patterns of land monopolization and reliance upon indebted servitude that meant that peasant refugees in the British settlement experienced many of the same pressures as they had done in Yucatán prior to the war.

Chapter 3 discusses the fragmentation of the rebellion and the 1853 Pacífico-Yucatán peace treaty, which promised to the surrendering rebels some tax relief, emancipation of (some) indebted servants, and (apparently) use of lands within what is now northwestern Belize. It traces the deteriorating relations between the Pacíficos and the British as Pacífico leaders made demands for rent from British timber companies, backed by threats of force. It describes the secession from the Chichanhá Pacíficos of the San Pedro Maya and how they were welcomed into the British settlement as laborers and company tenants. Chapter 4 lays out how the Kruso'ob and Pacífico Maya competition over land intensified pressures on British Hondurans for open trade in munitions and for rent, and also led to occasional raids across the Hondo River related to that competition. It charts the

processes of land consolidation and the rise of a company of overweening power: the British Honduras Company. The lieutenant governor of the newly formed colony of British Honduras—worried about invasion by both the *Pacíficos* centered at Chichanhá and the *Kruso'ob*—was grateful when the leader of the San Pedro Maya, Asunción Ek, proposed that he be given a position within the colonial government as essentially a frontier guardsman, police captain, and private security for the British Honduras Company.

Chapter 5 outlines the territorial anxieties, hyperlocal disputes, blunders, and misunderstandings that resulted in a British military march on San Pedro in 1866. The ethnic hierarchy of northern Yucatán was reproduced in the British settlement, as the most prominent subcontractors for the logging companies were wealthier Yucatecan refugees of Spanish descent who subsequently had positions of authority over Maya people as landlords and bosses; their actions contributed to a deterioration of relations between the Maya and the British. Frustrated by British munitions sales to their *Kruso'ob* enemies and frustrated by deceit and trickery on the part of the British Honduras Company, the *Pacífico* generals in southern Campeche (including Luciano Tzuc and Marcos Canul) employed ever more aggressive tactics, including armed raids on logging camps, large-scale theft, and kidnapping hostages for ransom. Precisely when Marcos Canul was rumored to be heading to San Pedro to use that as a base from whence to place forcible demands for rent at a series of British Honduran logging camps, a major dispute broke out at San Pedro between village residents and the company foreman. The foreman threatened to have San Pedro leaders arrested just when a company of West India regimental soldiers arrived to suss out whether the residents planned on conspiring with Canul against the logging companies. Confused, misunderstood, and pressured on several sides, Asunción Ek threw in his lot with Marcos Canul and the Battle of San Pedro ensued.

Chapter 6 overviews the further devolution of Maya-British relations in the colony, as British forces retaliated with a scorched earth campaign of the western villages and a demand for total surrender, including relinquishment of all Maya land claims within the purported limits of the colony. The San Pedro Maya were later allowed to return and rebuild their villages, but their rights were curtailed and official rhetoric turned increasingly racist. *Pacífico* and *Kruso'ob* leaders conducted raids into the British settlement to capture deserters and debtors, and to protect the integrity of their supposed border, British officials aided in their deportation, thereby reinforcing a cross-border dynamic of labor exploitation. The so-called “final Indian attack” in the colony took place in 1872 as Marcos Canul led an attack on Orange Walk. Canul was mortally wounded, and although Maya groups would continue to lay claim to the western region of

Belize for decades to come, the San Pedro Maya and Pacíficos never again took up arms against the British. From the colonial period through the nineteenth century, therefore, the region of Belize continued to be a place where Maya people fled to escape military conflict, oppressive taxes, debt burdens, and forced labor, including the military draft. This book is inspired by the people who experienced exploitation and violence—and ran away.